Text #1: Laws Against Texting While Driving Are Ineffective

New Laws Might Be Ineffective

The report by the Highway Loss Data Institute, an insurance industry-funded research group, compared crash rates in four states that prohibit texting with those in states where it is allowed. It found no reduction in states where it is banned.

"The point of texting bans is to reduce crashes, and by this essential measure the laws are ineffective," said Adrian Lund, president of the research group and of the affiliated Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

An estimated 450,000 people were killed or injured last year in distracted-driving accidents.

Text messaging has been around for about a dozen years, with public surveys showing overwhelming agreement that it's a dangerous distraction while driving.

Lund says that while state legislatures are increasing speed limits to 75 mph, safety efforts have been "sidetracked" by a focus on reports of unintended acceleration and distracted driving.

"The hyper-visibility of these issues diverts attention from initiatives that have far greater potential to save lives," Lund said in August 2010. "We need to look for the next big idea, like airbags, and get it done."

The architect of the distracted-driving campaign, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, said his attack on cellphone use while driving has not come at the expense of other safety initiatives. He also has been a vocal advocate for efforts against drunk driving, and for seat-belt use among others. Highway death tolls are at their lowest level since 1950.

Explaining the Data

"This report is completely misleading," LaHood said. "Distracted-driving-related crashes killed nearly 5,500 people in 2009 and injured almost half a million more. Lives are at stake, and all the reputable research we have says that tough laws, good enforcement and increased public awareness will help put a stop to the deadly epidemic of distracted driving on our roads."

The texting issue has been the point of the spear in LaHood's distracted-driving campaign, which has included a pair of major conferences to address the issue. Though he has long advocated that cellphones not be used while driving, sending text messages was deemed more dangerous, and banning the practice was more politically palatable.

Surveys have shown overwhelming support for a ban on text messaging, but the majority of drivers say they want to continue to use their cellphones behind the wheel. That reality played into the debate Sunday [September 26, 2010], when a coalition of state highway safety officials voted against endorsement of a cellphone ban because, as their spokesman put it, "We don't want this to become like the speeding issue, which we've already lost. Everybody speeds."

The institute research found that rather than a decline in texting-related collisions, "there appears to have been a small increase in claims in the states enacting texting bans" which "suggests that texting drivers have responded to the law ... by hiding their phones from view."

Comment [AN1]: The president of a research group for highway safety claims that texting bans don't reduce crashes.
Comment [AN2]: 450,000 people per year die in distracted driving accidents.
Comment [AN3]: Speeding laws have been ineffective. So much so that many states are upping the speed limits to adjust for the tendency to drive faster than the limit.
Comment [AN4]: After the campaigns against drunk driving and seatbelt use, highway deaths are the lowest they've been in over sixty years.
Comment [AN5]: The majority of people surveyed said that they support a ban on texting while driving, but they also say that they want to keep using their cellphones while driving.
Comment [AN6]: State highway officials said they don't want to do a law banning cell phone use because it will be as ineffective as speeding laws.
Comment [AN7]: Those who have done texting bans have just seen an increase in hiding the use of the phones...not stopping.
Lund cautioned that "finding no reduction in crashes, or even a small increase, doesn't mean it's safe to text and drive. ... It's just that bans aren't reducing this crash risk." "Our reaction [to the institute report] is that we are not surprised as state enforcement of texting bans is really now just getting underway," said Jonathan Adkins, spokesman for the Governors Highway Safety Association, at whose convention the report was presented. "That said, there is not currently a federal pool of money for states to access for distracted-driving enforcement much like there is for drunk driving and seat-belt use."

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Source Citation

Text #2 Texting While Driving Is as Dangerous as Drunk Driving

Fighting to Change Driving Laws

This public-safety movement has for years lobbied state legislatures to change driving laws, worked with schools and student groups, and pressurized the federal government and industries to set new cellphone regulations. But momentum has picked up recently with some high-profile fatal crashes, including a number involving teens texting while driving. And last month, in what many saw as a coming of age for the movement, the US Department of Transportation hosted a distracted driving summit, where Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood called for action against what he termed a "deadly epidemic."

"Distracted driving is a menace to society. And it seems to be getting worse every year," he said. But he and others say that the fight against distracted driving could be much harder than other public-safety efforts, including the anti-drunken-driving movement that swept the country in the 1980s.

Far more people talk on their cellphones and use other electronic gadgets in the car than drive drunk, safety officials say. A generation of text-happy teenagers are getting their driver's licenses, and established drivers are increasingly buying smart phones that allow for distracting activity beyond just texting and talking—GPS [global positioning satellite] and entertainment devices, too, pull eyes and mental focus off the road.

Researchers have found that the brain receives a rush when it processes a text message or ring—the same high a gambler feels when hitting the jackpot.

And even where hand-held phone use in cars is banned—as it is in California, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Washington, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands—enforcement is difficult. One study observing New York drivers, for instance, showed that the law did little to reduce the number of drivers with phones to cars.

While dozens of countries—from Australia to Zimbabwe—take a harsh view of this behavior and have banned hand-held phones in cars, there is little social stigma in the US.
Moreover, some research suggests that Americans are actually addicted to their phones. Harvard University psychiatrist John Ratey and other researchers have found that the brain receives a rush when it processes a text message or ring—the same high a gambler feels when hitting the jackpot.

**Battling Cell Phone Addiction**

"It is a complex problem," says David Strayer, who studies cellphones and driving at the University of Utah. "We may have gotten ourselves into an addiction that we might not be able to get out of."

'Distracted Driving' is a catchall term that can include all sorts of behavior behind the wheel, from eating to applying makeup to texting. A distracted driver has what psychologists call "inattention blindness"—the brain does not process what is physically within eyesight, such as a red light.

The movement against distracted driving has increasingly focused on what it considers a deadly mix of two American passions: the automobile and new technology.

"There are always going to be distractions," says David Teeter, senior director of transportation strategic initiatives at the National Safety Council, whose 12-year-old son was killed in a crash caused by a driver on a cellphone. "But the advent of mobile electronic communication devices has really changed the game because they've become so phenomenally prolific in such a short period of time. We've been talking on the phone for 80 years. We've been driving 100 years. It's only recently that we've tried to combine the two."

Most drivers say they're not happy about sharing the road with others trying the new technology.

A 2009 AAA [Automobile Association of America] Foundation study found that 91.5 percent of drivers considered talking on the phone while driving a serious threat to their safety; 97 percent said it was completely unacceptable to send a text or e-mail while driving. But two-thirds of those people admitted talking on their own phones while driving, and 1 in 7 have texted while driving.

**A Pervasive Habit**

Similarly, a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study, in which data collectors observed drivers, estimated that 6 percent of drivers at any time are on the phone.

At the University of Utah's Applied Cognition Laboratory, Professor Strayer has been testing this do-as-I-say theory for a decade. Using neuroimaging and a drive simulator, he and his colleagues have watched what happens when drivers—including those who claim to be able to text, tweet, and talk safely at the wheel—mix cellphones and cars.

Unlike a conversation with a passenger sharing the same physical space of the car, the electronic conversation takes a driver into a virtual space away from the road.

The results are stark: Almost nobody multiprocesses the way they think they can. For 98 percent of the population, regardless of age, the likelihood of a crash while on a cellphone increases fourfold; the reaction to simulated traffic lights, pedestrians, and vehicles is comparable to that of someone legally intoxicated.

Although some critics claim that the simulator isn't real enough, studies of real-life driving in Canada and Australia had similar findings.
Strayer also found little difference between those using hand-held cellphones and those on hands-free headsets. The disruption, he says, is cognitive. Unlike a conversation with a passenger sharing the same physical space of the car, the electronic conversation takes a driver into a virtual space away from the road.

"We record brain activity," Strayer says, "and we can show that it's, suppressed from the cellphone conversation."

Interpreting the Data About Crashes

But where, cellphone proponents ask, are the crashes? While the number of cellphone subscribers has rocketed to 270 million in the US—the number of auto fatalities has remained stable, at about 40,000 deaths a year. The US Department of Transportation estimates that 6,000 of those are the result of distracted driving, but it has no specific statistics for phone-related deaths. The number of crashes has also remained steady.

"There have been some suggestions by researchers that the risk [of crash] is increased exponentially due to talking on the cellphone," says John Walls, spokesman for CTIA-The Wireless Association, which represents the cellphone industry. "Yet, for whatever reason, we haven't seen that play out in the number of accidents that occur. Although I would never suggest that that means to talk more in the car."

He says that his group does not take a stance on phoning-while-driving legislation.

"This is one of the key questions we're trying to unravel," says Russ Rader, spokesman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Mr. Rader says his group is studying how much the fatality rate should have dropped, given increased safety measures—such as better road construction and improved braking systems—as a way to gauge the real impact of cellphone use.

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Another explanation for the statistics, safety experts say, is that people tend to lie about their phone use in crashes. And without a subpoena for cellphone records, there's no way to check. There's often no box on the police report to check if the driver admits cellphone use.

Source Citation